

Juliet Davenport

President, Master, Distinguished Governor, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Juliet Davenport as a Fellow of Birkbeck.

We all have bad weather days. For weatherman Michael Fish, that day was Thursday, 15 October 1987. That day, while wearing a grey-brown crumpled suit and grey-brown and white striped tie on the One O'clock News, he announced:

Earlier on today, apparently a woman rang the BBC and said that she heard there was a hurricane on the way. Well, if you're watching, don't worry: there isn't.

Unfortunately, within hours, south-east England was experiencing the worst storm for three centuries. The cyclone passed from Cornwall across the UK in a north-easterly direction through the night. Winds exceeded 107 miles an hour. They caused between 450 to 750 million pounds worth of damage to insured property. Entire forests were flattened. 19 people were killed. The destruction was the worse experienced in Britain since the Second World War.

The country was in an uproar. The Daily Telegraph led with the headline, "Met men fail to predict worst recorded storm", whilst The Daily Mirror asked "Why didn't they warn us?" BBC weatherman Michael Fish was infamously singled out as a scapegoat for not predicting it. In Fish's defence, this was before probabilistic systems of forecasting were being used and so Fish had access to only a single deterministic forecast, which gave no clues as to what might happen. Nevertheless, this popular weatherman had been caught with his forecasts down.

For one person, however, this was an "eco-eureka moment". Juliet Davenport had been studying atmospheric physics at the time and she immediately grasped the importance of

the 1987 storm: humanity needed to take care of their planet or there would be worse to come.

She was particularly concerned about the effect of rising carbon-dioxide emissions on climate. Moreover, she was determined to do something about it.

So: who is Davenport? She was born in Haslemere, the most southerly town in Surrey, to a family whose father was a journalist and rally driver. She went to an all-girls school, with excellent Science teaching and an inspirational Physics teacher who used to bribe students with chocolate cake.

From there, she went to the splendid, thirteenth-century grounds of Merton College, Oxford, to study a decidedly modern discipline: atmospheric physics.

Between 1992 and 1994, however, she could be found in a much less salubrious (but I hasten to add, equally distinguished) College, Birkbeck.

Here, she studied environmental economics, developmental economics, macroeconomics, microeconomics, and econometrics for an MSc in Economics and Environmental Economics. Why economics, as opposed to another physics' degree? She explains that "physics tells us what is going on, but economics [is] the route to working out how to shift the economy, because that [is] where the problem [is] being created". It was Birkbeck that set her up for what became a remarkable and distinguished career.

She won a studentship at the European Commission on energy policy, from which she went to the European Parliament to work on carbon taxation. This was when she came to realise that the West had no right to lecture developing countries about the dangers of climate change unless they took action within their own territories. From there, she went to the environmental consultancy Energy for Sustainable Development.

These experiences were formative, but they were also frustrating. She has spoken openly about “long-winded” political processes, governmental “inertia”, and politicians too lazy and complacent to read the scientific documentation.

The decisive point in her odyssey came in 1999 when she set up and later became CEO of Unit[e], a subsidiary of the Monkton Group. In 2003, Unit[e] was renamed “Good Energy”.

What were her biggest challenges? Ignorance and apathy. Davenport has recalled that in 2003 the most progressive environmental campaign on TV and radio featured domestic scenes with "farting fridges" and other badly behaved appliances shouting abuse at their owners. The campaign was supposed to encourage people to buy energy-efficient appliances but failed to advise consumers on how to actually do so.

This was her task. How could she convince the public of the benefits of clean energy?

Davenport took charge of a “values-based business” – one that has to be authentic as well as incredibly competitive. Principles are crucial (which is why the Board of “Good Energy” is half women and the business is a flexible employer). They can’t be seen dealing with companies known for poor records in human’s rights. They are committed to working for the creation of a decentralised market, where people and communities generate their own power. Half of the shareholders of “Good Energy” are customers: they know what they want, and why.

Why is “Good Energy” so important? When it was founded, people in the UK had remarkably little idea about climate change, and even less idea about the damage being done by the fact that nearly all energy was based on fossil fuels. Even people who wanted to “go green” had few if any options. “Good Energy” decided that wasn’t good enough. It set about harnessing wind (53% of their energy last year), sunshine (24%), biofuels (19%, of which 6% comes from manure and sewerage), and hydro (4%) to make electricity. They own some solar and wind sites in Cornwall (the UK’s first wind farm), Dorset, and Yorkshire and have invested in the planned Tidal Lagoon in Swansea Bay.

In an exceptionally competitive market, it is heartening to know that, a decade and a half after being started, it is supplying 200,000 customers. It has gone from two people and a

desk (or, as Davenport revealingly put it in one interview, from a “small bar in a pub”) to producing 20 per cent of the energy in the UK. Last year, she can boast that “Good Energy” had a revenue of 90.4 million.

Is it any wonder that Davenport herself and “Good Energy” have won award after award. There are too many to list, but to give you a taster, Davenport has won the Business Green Leader of the Year Award 2012, PEA Business Award CEO of the Year 2012, First Women Award (Retail and Consumer) 2011 and PLUS Markets CEO of the year 2009, 2010 and 2012. In 2013, she was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year Honours List. “Good Energy” has won a Sunday Times Best Green Company Award twice, an Observer Ethical Award, and was ranked the top company among UK energy providers for customer satisfaction in the Which? magazine survey in 2010, 2012 and 2013. It was named the Best Green Company by The Times twice; the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust awarded it an “Outstanding Contribution to the Environment” in 2009; from The Observer, it won the “Ethical Award” for best online retail initiative. In 2015 alone, Good Energy 2015 was named Company of the Year at the BusinessGreen Leaders Awards, Leaders of the Year at the British Renewable Energy Awards and Social Impact Company of the Year for the second year running at the Small Cap Awards. In 2016, Which? Customer care survey declared it the only energy company to achieve a score of more than 81% for five years in a row.

Davenport is also on a crusade to promote women in science. It is shocking to note that, in 2017, women make up only 14 per cent of Science, Engineering, and Technology management and 8 per cent of professional engineering. This has to change.

Davenport and “Good Energy” are also committed to giving back to the community. “Good Energy” provides a Birkbeck student with a PhD studentship on renewable energy. It not only covers the cost of tuition fees for Home/EU students, but also provides a maintenance grant and support for research costs, fieldwork and attending conferences.

One of the students who has benefitted is Marit Marsh-Stromberg who explored the supply of renewable energy across Europe. It is research that helps us progress towards a sustainable future.

There are challenges ahead: for example, Brexit has made imports like solar panels much more expensive.

For Davenport, though, energy is “magic”, potentially changing the way we live. And she has wrought magic, convincing people that it is possible to change. After all, in 2004 the renewables section produced 4 per cent of the UK’s electricity; now it is more like one-quarter.

And public opinion has also changed, with more than three-quarters of people supporting renewables – at least in theory. More need to put their money where their mouths are.

Davenport has come a long way from that storm night in 1987 when she had her “eco-eureka moment”. She describes herself as a “rebel within the establishment”, but she is really an eco-energy pioneer with a “revolutionary vision for the UK energy market”.

These are just a few of the reasons we are so proud that she is a Fellow of Birkbeck.